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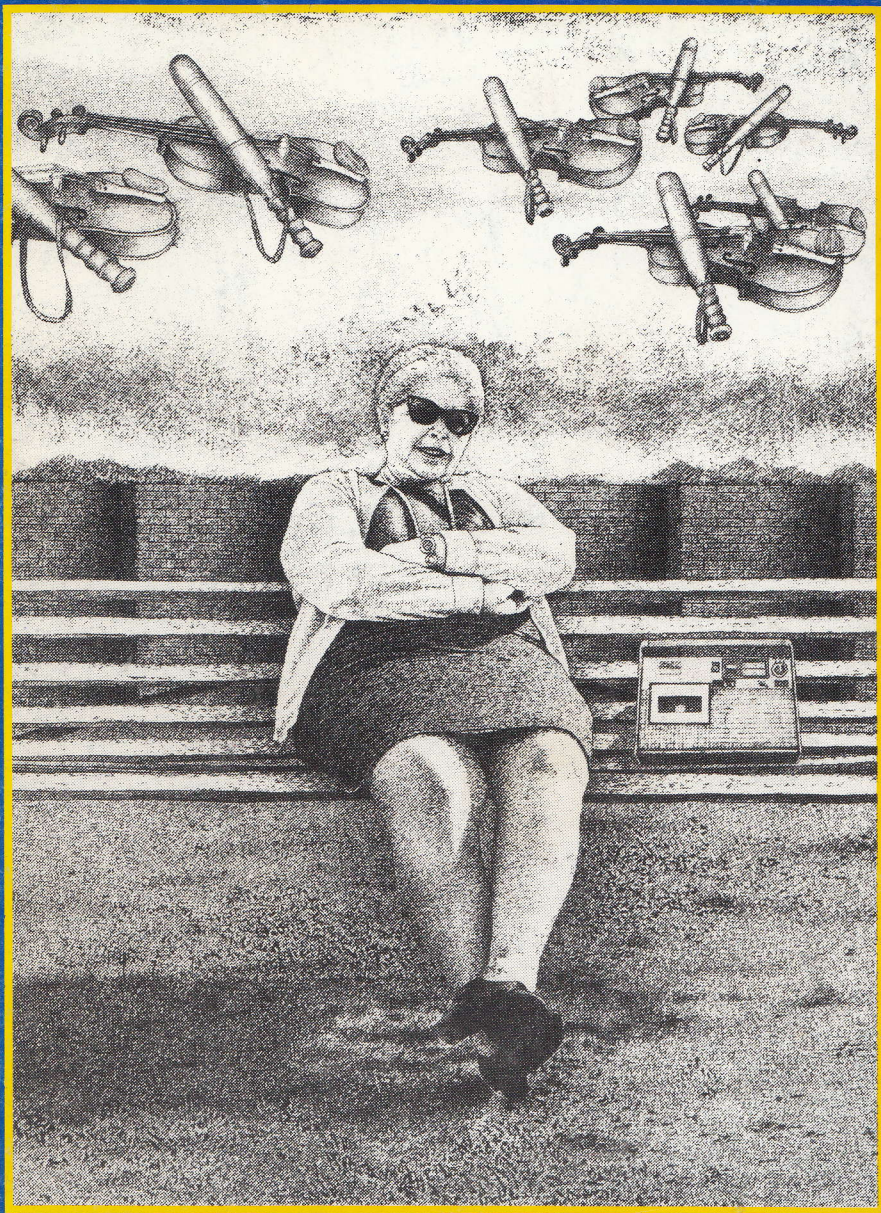
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*Flemming Røgilds (Ed.)*

# EVERY CLOUD HAS A SILVER LINING



*Studies in Cultural Sociology no. 28*



**Institute of Cultural Sociology**

**University of Copenhagen**

# **Every Cloud Has A Silver Lining**

**Lectures on Everyday Life, Cultural Production and Race**

**Flemming Røgilds (Ed.)**

**Studies in Cultural Sociology no. 28**

**Akademisk Forlag**

**Every Cloud Has A Silver Lining**

**Lectures on Everyday Life, Cultural Production and Race**

**Edited by Flemming Røgilds**

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# Black Music and Young People in Birmingham

*Simon Jones*

I'm going to give a fairly personal view of the relationship between black and white youth in Britain, from my own experience of living and working in Birmingham, England. This is a very condensed version of a much larger study which looks at the impact of Jamaican popular culture and music on post-war Britain as a whole, and tries to place that impact in a much broader historical context, by looking at the development of Jamaican music from the Caribbean to the British context.<sup>1</sup>

I'm not going to look at this historical side of the study. I'm going to concentrate more on the ethnographic side, given that we're trying to think about questions of cultural production and »everyday life«. What I want to do is to pull out some key points from the ethnographic study that I did, some points about method and some political implications, and to use some recent work I've been doing on arts and cultural provision for young people to make some comments about cultural production.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, what I'm going to say very much complements what Paul Gilroy has been talking about, in that I'm coming in from a complementary angle on the cultural politics of race. And I want to start by picking up some of the themes mentioned by Paul, by giving a particular slant on forms of contemporary racism, particularly images of the inner-city that were around at the time of the 1985 riots in Handsworth and Tottenham.

What you saw, in the aftermath of those riots, throughout the media, and the popular press in particular, were fears being expressed about Britain's inner-city areas being taken over by »mob rule« and turned into »no-go« areas, where the only law was that of the »jungle«. A number of national newspapers dwelt on the theme that somehow this wasn't »England« anymore, that the inner-city was an »alien« country. The inner-city was portrayed as a site of racial war, as lacking a community spirit. The images, in some newspapers, were of whites abused and terrorized by their black neighbours, and living in perpetual fear of being mugged,



raped and harassed. So the inner-city was defined as a site of negative interracial encounters, one where black and white people lived side by side yet estranged from one another.

Now, underpinning those images was precisely this notion of racial incompatibility that Paul talks about in his book - this naturalizing of hostility and antagonism between different »racial« and »ethnic« groups.<sup>3</sup> Such ideas are premised on the notion of cultural differences as fixed, neo-biological properties of human nature - one of the key, ideological foundations of the »new racism«.

For me, when I came to write my book, this seemed a very important reason to challenge these images with other, more complex, more subtle, more contradictory, and even positive images, than those of natural conflict. What I wanted to say, and what was being said to me by some of the people I interviewed, was that, in a sense, this *wasn't* »England« anymore. It wasn't »England« because a fundamental transformation of whole sections of urban communities had indeed occurred as a result of post-war migrant labour movements and settlement patterns. What I wanted to do was to illustrate that transformation from the point of view of white, working class experiences and responses.

Now, *Birmingham* is particularly important here, because it has a very crucial place in the post-war history of race in Britain. Birmingham, and the West Midlands of England in general, has been the site of particularly intense encounters between sections of black and white communities, around housing, around employment and settlement patterns. As a region, it has long had especially strong traditions of right-wing nationalism, conservatism, and, arguably, more prominent forms of racism in the white community than in other urban areas. These features have all been shaped by particular regional economic and social conditions to do with the decline of local manufacturing industry, and with changing employment structures, settlement and housing patterns.

So, in one sense, the political experience of race, for some sections of the white population, has been broader and closer than in other areas of urban Britain.

But, in a curious sense, against the background of these *same* conditions, there has emerged *another* set of traditions and experiences, which have involved *other* kinds of encounters between black and white communities. These have produced a unique, dynamic kind of rapport between their respective cultural and political traditions, a rapport founded in some areas of the city on nearly forty years of co-existence, and on more integrated housing and settlement patterns, and social and leisure



spaces. The result has been all kinds of cross-cutting affiliations, around mixed friendship patterns, mixed marriages, mixed kinship, neighbourhood networks and peer groups - many of which extend beyond the inner-city into parts of the outer-ring and the white working class suburbs.

So, contrary to one kind of popular image of inner-city as a site of conflict between different »ethnic« and »racial« groups, there is a wide surface of contact between black and white communities at all levels of the social structure. Similar kinds of communities can also be found in other urban areas such as Liverpool, Cardiff, Bristol, Manchester, Sheffield, and parts of London.

Now, it seemed to me that in academic work, particularly in the British sociology of race, these kinds of cross-cultural processes hadn't been looked at in any depth, other than in terms of inter-ethnic rivalry, or in terms which echoed the dominant understanding of »race relations«, namely that the study of »race relations« amounted to the study of black people and black culture. Indeed, the explanation of »race relations« according to the separate, and relatively fixed cultural characteristics of different racial and »ethnic« groups, seemed to echo some important features of contemporary popular racism.<sup>4</sup>

The other main problem with the »race relations« paradigm was that »culture« was understood in terms that were far too monolithic, i.e. in terms of mutually exclusive, homogeneous, solid and impermeable »blocks« that were the fixed »property« of racial groups. For my purposes, that suggested a quite false discontinuity between the forms of consciousness of black and white people, and couldn't account for the mass impact of black cultural forms beyond the black community.<sup>5</sup>

So that's one point where my work takes off - to look at white responses to black cultural and musical traditions, beginning from the fundamental assumption (now fairly commonplace in Cultural Studies/Sociology) that race has to be understood as a lived social relation that is culturally experienced and handled by white people as much as by black, and that is mediated by relations *between* black and white people.

Having made that assumption, the next set of questions worth asking seemed to be, what are the actual *forms* of that relation, particularly the more dynamic aspects of cross-cultural interactions? What are their political effects and implications?

Now, Dick Hebdige, in his book *Subculture* did, partly, address those questions, and came up with a very suggestive reading of the stylistic connections between black and white youth subcultures.<sup>6</sup> Hebdige argues that a »phantom history« of post-war race relations can be found »played



out« in youth cultural style, and can be read off in a series of white sub-cultural borrowings of black culture in dress, dance, language and music, from the Teds, through the Mods and Skins, to the Punks.

The basic problem with Hebdige's approach, for me though, was that by concerning himself with mainly stylistic/symbolic links, he ended up with rather an external reading of the relation between black and white youth. So, for Hebdige, the connection between black and white cultures is presented as a »covert«, »hidden«, structural relation. Such an approach makes it very difficult to reconcile the abstract level of his structuralist analysis with the responses, experiences and life histories of actual people. It tended to mystify responses that were actually quite concrete, visible, rooted in conscious lived experience, and had their own histories and traditions.

So, what I wanted to do was to have a more contextualized, historical approach that situated white responses within *actual* social encounters and *actual* social/geographic locations. Most importantly, I wanted to begin from the self-conscious, knowledgable forms of attachment of white youth to black music and culture. I wanted to look at the meanings that white youth themselves attached to reggae music, for example, and at all the complexities and contradictions of their responses.

The questions I wanted to ask were: What does it actually mean to inhabit certain identities, certain cultural positions at the level of complex, personal feelings, attitudes and investments? What does it mean as a white person to have grown up alongside black people and shared the same classrooms, neighbourhoods and leisure spaces? What are the kinds of attractions and forms of identification with black musical and cultural forms?

In terms of methodology, then, we're looking at something like an ethnographic study that attempts to convey something of the everyday nature of people's lived experiences and subjectivities. However, it must be said that I didn't really have a prior methodology as such, and that much of the motivation for the research, and the reason why I was able to do it in the first place was due to my own personal interests and musical enthusiasm, and my own involvement in the local reggae music scene in Birmingham.

So it didn't start out as an academic project as such - it subsequently evolved into one, but it began from a very personal engagement. This had its advantages, in that I was already involved and known to people, and was able to talk to people and set up interviews with relative ease. So, in that way, I was using myself, and own investments as a kind of resource.



Because I was white, and had a relation to black music/culture and black people, the obvious thing to do was to investigate the responses of other white people, and in that sense I'm perfectly willing to admit that in one sense the study is heavily autobiographical. I don't think there is anything »wrong« about that, but I do think we always need to be explicit in this kind of work about our own involvements, investments and motives.

The core of the ethnography consisted of a series of interviews with a group of 16 young white people, 10 men and 6 women, all of whom has some kind of direct relationship with black people and black culture or music. The interviews were mostly 1 to 1, informal conversations where I'd let people talk, reflect and contemplate about themselves, and about their past experiences. So, in the end, what I got were a series of life histories or autobiographies - mainly retrospective accounts of past experiences. In that sense they represented more of a kind of oral history, than an ethnography of a cohesive social group or »subculture«. And because it wasn't a large group (the core group was only 16 people), I couldn't really generalize from their responses (I happen to think that they *do* have general implications, and *do* shed light on general cultural processes). But the most important thing about them was their narrative detail and richness as forms of consciousness in themselves, and all the subtleties, contradictions and *inner* dimensions of people's different responses.

I want now to talk about the responses themselves. These I organized around particular cultural forms, such as style, language and music. Style, I'm not going to say too much about, partly because it is a well worked area in the study of youth cultures, and because I don't think it always tells you a great deal on its own about the relationships between black and white youth. Language, I think is far more interesting and significant, but I'll leave that for Roger Hewitt to talk about - just to say though that alot of his findings about white use of black speech patterns were very much echoed in my own work.

I want to talk mainly about music, about white responses to black music - to reggae and soul, and I'm using »soul« here as a broad generic term for contemporary black American music, funk, hip-hop, house, and black British appropriations of those forms. For the purposes of clarity, I'm going to talk about three areas in relation to music, areas which nevertheless overlap with one another in people's musical activities: They are: Musical texts or forms: Cultural *practices* related to music: And the *production/consumption* relationship.

In terms of music as text, I want to suggest that musical forms, for black



youth as much as for white, have just as much effect and meaning, through non-verbal/non-linguistic elements as through explicit verbal messages and narratives. Rhythms, musical textures, melodies, and, especially, all the inflections, nuances and expressions of vocal and instrumental sounds (as well as, increasingly, visual signs) - all these have a capacity to produce particular kinds of meanings, pleasures and feelings of their own accord. These features are all »brought to life« or pulled into significance in actual contexts of consumption, particularly public contexts, for example in discos, dances, clubs.

In terms of lyrical discourses, a key feature of white responses was that different inflections or interpretations could be made by listeners, differently placed socially and in different listening contexts. That has now become a basis axiom of popular music studies. The point is that people always produce their own readings, they don't just reproduce the meanings and categories in which particular music is packaged and sold by the leisure industry.

What I found was that young whites picked up certain stanzas or portions of lyrics which had a particular resonance, and applied them to their own situations. The music of Bob Marley proved to be particularly open to such use. This had a lot to do with the ambiguities of expression in his songs, a certain looseness of meaning which enabled different readings to be made of songs originally written from a Jamaican point of reference. This process is, in turn facilitated by the terms of address used in songs, particularly the pronouns of *I*, *We*, *You*. Such linguistic terms enable particular songs or singers to be made to »speak« on behalf of the listener, for songs to be personalized and made to address different senses of identity.

In this way, many of the general discourses in reggae, and soul music as well, could be used to make sense of age-based, class-based, or gender-based experiences - for example, discourses about unity, freedom, oppression, poverty, crime and, justice, the law and work, discourses addressing gender relations and sexuality, and discourses addressed to more race specific themes such as those of black history and racial oppression.

As a text, music could also be used, in a more abstract way, through young whites relating to particular performers as personal »hero figures«. The mass adulation and enthusiasm for particular black performers is very commonplace amongst young whites, and I want to tentatively suggest that it might have important, and hitherto unforeseen, anti-racist side effects. I say unforeseen, because it is a process which occurs precisely as an *effect* of the mass production and dissemination of commodities and



the images and signs that accompany them, and one that occurs through *mainstream* popular music, rather than on its radical fringes. The whole question of role models, hero figures and »stars« and what they signify, or don't signify, in terms of race, is an interesting, undeveloped and important area.

As far as *practices* are concerned, there are a whole range of activities in which both black and white youth are engaged, which are music-related, but which don't necessarily involve playing a musical instrument in the role of the »creative artist«. These activities, nevertheless, involve their own kinds of cultural work and have their own aesthetic criteria (what Paul Willis has called »grounded aesthetics«) and which are realized and practised in all sorts of forms of creative consumption». These include, not only listening to music in a variety of contexts, but buying records and exercising critical choice as a significant and pleasurable activity in itself: Buying second-hand or »old« records and doing your own archaeologies of »old« music, carefully tracking down and excavating the »originals« and building dance cultures around the reappropriation of such music: Dancing itself as an area of massive cultural work and investment with its own informal learning processes, and routines of practising/training: Home taping of music (from the radio, of live music events, of records): The use of cassette tapes as a cultural currency for the consumption and distribution of music amongst the young: And using music in a more flexible and public way through portable cassette players and hi-fi equipment.

All of these practices, that are normally regarded as »passive« forms of consumption, suggest that the processes or »moments« of consumption and production are perhaps more closely related in some musical activities amongst the young than is usually thought. They suggest, moreover, that consumption itself is a kind of cultural production, involving »creative« symbolic processes, creation of identities, of spaces, of the self, all with their own kinds of cultural empowerment.

In a very crucial sense, the more »worked up« forms of instrumental and vocal music-making amongst the young, both black and white, develop out of consumption, out of people's enthusiasms, pleasures and investments as consumers, listeners, fans and dancers. So, you *do* get musicians learning to play musical instruments by copying records, or as a result of being inspired by particular bands or musical styles. You *do* get the use of domestic hi-fi equipment (turntables, records, cassette players) as instruments of production in their own right, for example in the practices of »scratching« derived from black American hip-hop cul-



ture. You also get records being used as the springboard for musical *re*-production and *re*presentation, through cutting-up, mixing and recombining fragments of different records. You get all the forms of improvised oral poetry and »musical talking« which accompany the transmission of music in contexts of public performance, i.e reggae Djing or »toasting«, and »rap«. Finally, you get all the forms of Do-It-Yourself home recording, made possible by the relative fall in the cost of recording technology such as sampling and mixing devices, synthesizers, sequencers and drum machines.

So, there has been, in the last 10 years or so in Britain, something of a revolution in music making amongst the young. In terms of the relationship between black and white youth, and the politics of race, what these processes mean, is that you now have a whole range of black, and black-defined musical traditions, practices, institutions and spaces which have become a common resource, a kind of shared »language« or expressive medium for black and white youth.

In Birmingham, this has been particularly visible in recent years in local musicianship, and in live music scene, which, in the late 70s and early 80s played host to a unique kind of interaction between rock and reggae bands. Many of the mixed multi-racial bands that came out of the West Midlands in this period (for example bands like UB40 and all the Two-Tone groups) attempted to articulate the experience of the generation of black and white youth who had grown up in the same neighbourhoods, gone to the same schools, shared the same youth clubs and leisure spaces. They did so in their songs, their musical forms (which synthesized ska/reggae and punk) and in their black/white Two-Tone style and symbolism. They attempted to use music as a space for sharing common values and expressing contradictions around the issue of race.

I want to return now to some of the questions I posed at the beginning about the forms of relations between black and white youth and their implications in terms of the politics of race amongst young people. What I want to tentatively suggest is that all these various cross-racial and cross-cultural processes - around music, language and style, around friendships, and around particular cultural spaces and institutions - these processes can, potentially, have important anti-racist effects on young whites. That can occur in a whole number of ways, for example, through engaging with the contradictions of appropriating, of affiliating to, black culture and music: Through knowledges derived from primary relationships with black people, which involve a kind of sensitizing to racism: Or through first hand experience of racism, racism that is either perpetrated against



black people around them, or is experienced from other whites (i.e the experience of being condemned, proscribed or policed by white peers, family or in public for their affiliations/friendships with black people). Taken together, these processes could potentially disrupt some of the logic of racist explanations, and undermine stereotypes and some forms of common sense racism. Most importantly, they could undercut investments in certain nationalistic and patriotic ideas, and problematize what it meant to be »white« or »English« or »British«. They could potentially also result in competing or cross-cutting collective affiliations around notions of shared locality, community, region, or, even, musical practices.

Now, there are obviously lots of qualifications to that argument which I don't have the space to go into here. In short, though, it needs to be said that these smaller-scale processes are no panacea for racism in its wider, more collective, more institutionalised forms. Moreover, the affiliations and responses of young whites are often a highly contradictory mixture of common-sense racist attitudes and positive attractions to black music, black culture and/or black people. Most importantly perhaps, white involvement with Afro-Caribbean musical and cultural traditions offers no guarantee of mediating racism towards the Asian community (though much of this is very much in play at the moment and contingent on the development of evolving black British forms of Asian youth culture, music and language).

Nevertheless, these processes do show that young whites are not monolithically »racist« to the same degree, and in the same ways. They suggest that there's never any one singular form of racist identity, it's always different forms of racism. Inhabited at different times, in different contexts and to varying degrees. They suggest also that young people do actively produce their *own* anti-racist solution in their own identities, cultural forms and social arrangements, however contradictorily or impartially.

I want to conclude with a note about the social relations and politics of research, particularly of ethnography. My point is simply that this kind of research, and indeed any kind of academic research, particularly when it is published, should be seen as a form of cultural production in itself. I am arguing simply that we are implicated in the processes of cultural production of texts and representations, and that we should always think carefully, about the politics of those representations, who we are doing the research for, for whose benefit, and who is going to read it. I want to end by making a plea for this kind of close-up qualitative work, and arguing for its value in cultural studies/cultural sociology. My own view is



that it is absolutely essential to have some way of engaging with, and relating to, the knowledges, subjectivities, experiences of people beyond the academic community, outside of its own discourses. That kind of detailed, grounded, sensitive, involved research is critical, I think, if cultural studies is to have any explanatory or symbolic power.

So my conclusion is rather obvious - though it perhaps hasn't always seemed so from looking at some areas of academic research - and that is that people *do* have articulate knowledges about themselves, and their own conditions of existence. They do have their own, often priceless, critical insights, and they are quite capable of »speaking« and representing themselves. And I think that, a lot of the time, we could do little better than to listen carefully to what they've got to say, and find some way of conveying it to a wider public.

## Notes

1. Jones, Simon, 1988. *Black Culture. White Youth: The reggae tradition from JA to UK*, Macmillan.
2. *Gulbenkian Enquiry into Arts and Cultural Provision for Young People*, headed by Paul Willis.
3. Gilroy, Paul, 1987. *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack* London, Hutchinson.
4. Ibid.
5. I'm using »black« here as shorthand for Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American-derived musical and cultural forms that have been rearticulated in the British context.
6. Hebdige, Dick, 1979. *Subculture: the meaning of style* London: Methuen.